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Sicilian Mafia 'Ambassadors' Reported in U.S.

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NEW YORK—Federal prosecutors have learned that underworld "ambassadors" from the Sicilian Mafia have been operating in the United States for 15 to 20 years, sometimes joining in criminal operations with American organized crime families, sometimes operating alone.

Federal intelligence experts have learned through undercover operatives and a top Italian underworld informer that the Sicilian mobsters apparently concentrate on international drug trafficking and take direct orders from top heroin smugglers in Italy. Sometimes they sell drugs to American mobsters, at other times they distribute the narcotics independently, authorities said.

"They (the Sicilians) are not subordinate or superior, they are separate," Charles E. Rose, an assistant U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York and a Mafia expert, said Wednesday. "But they come together (with the American families) on matters of mutual interest."

Analyzing Confession

In recent days, intelligence experts on both sides of the Atlantic have been analyzing the revelations of Tomasso Buscetta, a leading Italian organized crime chief-tain who was extradited to Italy from Brazil. Largely through Buscetta's testimony, 366 persons were named in arrest warrants last weekend in what officials described as Italy's largest Mafia roundup since World War II.

The U.S. Justice Department ordered the arrest of 28 Americans as part of the Italian roundup.

The information received from Buscetta is regarded as particularly significant by federal organized crime analysts because he traveled around the world in the drug trade over the last two decades—years when narcotics trafficking expanded dramatically. In his travels, the analysts say, Buscetta gained first-hand knowledge of Sicilian Mafia methods and operations.

In Washington on Wednesday, the Joint Italian-American Working Group to Fight Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime, composed of Italian and American law enforcement officials, ended a two-day meeting with an agreement to expand U.S.-Italian cooperation in investigating organized crime.

Arrests Yield Data

In addition to Buscetta's confession, federal prosecutors say other key pieces of intelligence about the Sicilian ambassadors came after the arrest of 37 persons last April, in what the Justice Department has labeled the largest heroin case in the nation's history.

Investigators found that Sicilians who came to the United States from Italy 15 to 20 years ago used a string of pizza parlors in small U.S. cities and towns to smuggle and distribute \$1.65 billion worth of heroin.

The arrest last April in Madrid of Gaetano Badalamenti, a reputed Sicilian underworld leader and drug smuggler, was central to smashing the massive heroin ring. According to Rudolph W. Giuliani, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, Badalamenti had worked closely with Buscetta.

Among those who surrendered Tuesday for extradition to Italy was Salvatore Catalano of New York, who federal prosecutors at first believed was second in command of the Joseph Bonanno crime family. But the prosecutors have since revised their description of Catalano.

"We were going under the misimpression that those persons who were in the United States and who were born in Sicily . . . our thought was they were working hand-in-hand with the traditional United States crime families," Rose said.

"That's why Catalano was described as the Sicilian faction of the Bonanno family. We learned this is not accurate. Catalano is a member of a Sicilian-based Mafia family and works directly for and takes orders directly from the people in Sicily," the prosecutor charged.

"He runs his part of the show. He is an ambassador."

The U.S. attorney's office in the Eastern District of New York recently sent an undercover agent to Italy with the cooperation of the Italian government. The agent, Rose said, was able to make contact with Sicilian narcotics distributors who already had heroin distribution networks in place in the United States—networks separate from those of U.S.-based organized crime families.

Rose said that federal intelligence agents presently do not know how many Sicilian ambassadors have been dispatched to the United States over the years to conduct business for their bosses in Italy. But it appears that most of their activities are limited to the drug trade.